DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 440 486 EC 307 767

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TITLE	Education Reform: What Does It Mean for Students with Disabilities?
INSTITUTION	National Transition Network, Minneapolis, MN.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1999-09-00
NOTE	8p.
CONTRACT	H158M50001
AVAILABLE FROM	National Transition Network, Institute on Community Integration (UAP), University of Minnesota, 103 U-Tech Center, 1313 Fifth St. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55414. Tel: 612-627-4008
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
JOURNAL CIT	Parent Brief; Sep 1999
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Standards; *Disabilities; Educational Assessment; *Educational Change; Educational Innovation; Educational Legislation; Elementary Secondary Education; Evaluation Methods; Federal Legislation; Graduation Requirements; Individualized Education Programs; Outcomes of Education; *Parent Participation; *Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS	*Testing Accommodations (Disabilities)

ABSTRACT

This publication discusses education reform and the movement toward standards and assessments and its impact on students with disabilities. It is designed to provide parents with information about changes in assessment and graduation criteria, and assist parents in investigating the changes happening in their districts and states. Different sections address: (1) the impetus for assessing the outcomes of education; (2) how students with disabilities will participate in assessments; (3) testing accommodations; (4) who makes the assessment decisions; and (5) how assessments will affect a student's education. Suggested questions about assessment and graduation are provided that parents can ask to help them in planning their child's educational program and in participating as an Individualized Education Program team member. The publication closes with a summary of federal laws containing language addressing education reform and assessments. (CR)

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Education Reform: What Does It Mean for Students with Disabilities?

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National Transition Network

Parent Brief

September 1999

News and Information for Parents of Youth with Disabilities

Education Reform

What Does It Mean For Students with Disabilities?

Over the past number of years we have learned a lot about special education services. As parents of children with disabilities we have focused on educational programs that will prepare our children for life after high school. Now we are hearing a great deal of discussion about changes in the education system for *all* students. We hear the terms *education reform, graduation requirements, standards* and *assessments*. What do these mean for our children with disabilities?

If you have been following the changes occurring in your state and school district, you probably know the education reform movement is challenging and complex. The changes will affect *all* children in the education system. States must: A) improve the performance of *all* students, and B) hold schools accountable for student achievement. Every state is gearing up to meet federal regulations and will be implementing these education reforms in different ways.

To reach these goals states have been engaged in a number of activities, including one or more of the following:

- Examining and redesigning policies and procedures for assessing student performance.
- Selecting or developing new testing instruments.
- Defining and expanding state approved testing accommodations for participation in assessments.
- Reviewing and updating graduation criteria including course content and credit requirements.
- Increasing the number of exit options for completing high school (e.g., diplomas and certificates).

National and state education leaders firmly believe that the result of these changes will improve our ability to: 1) Evaluate the effectiveness of public school systems; 2) Provide instructional support and remedial opportunities to students who perform poorly on the assessments; 3) Influence curriculum changes; and 4) Improve student performance. In short, congress, educators, parents, and advocates believe there will be positive results from the education reform movement.

The changes your state or district makes may affect your child's education, especially the focus of their high school program. The purpose of this Parent Brief is to: 1) Provide you with information about changes in assessments and graduation criteria, and 2) assist you in investigating the changes happening in your district and state.

Accountability . . .

"...Systematic collection, analysis and use of information to hold schools, educators, and others responsible for the performance of students and the education system..." Education Commission of the States, 1998

- **System accountability:** How well district is performing.
- **Student accountability:** How well the student is performing.

Assessments. . .

. . . Tests and other measurements such as reports, collection of student work (portfolios), performance events (science experiments), etc. Assessments can be small or large scale (classroom, district, state, national). The ones described in this paper are administered to an entire grade level and are often referred to as "large-scale" assessments. The results are used to give a complete measure of all students in a particular grade across a state and the scores for all of the students must be reported. Assessments are administered for a variety of reasons. Most states now gather data to document that schools are teaching effectively and that students are making progress.

Note: Assessments used for determining eligibility for special education services are not discussed in this Parent Brief.

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University of Minnesota

The College of Education & Human Development

Why all the fuss about assessments?

Many parents are asking why all these changes are needed. It might be helpful to review what caused all this to happen. Over the past number of years educators, employers, and parents have been questioning the results of a high school education. Schools of higher education found many high school graduates significantly lacking in academic preparation. Businesses were convinced that schools were not preparing students with the necessary skills, behaviors and performance for the workplace. Parents of regular education students were questioning what their children were learning. Perhaps you, as a parent of a child with a disability, wondered if your child was progressing. *Did you feel that their Individual Education Program (IEP) focused on the same goals and objectives year after year? Were you worried that your child would not be prepared for life after high school? If you had these concerns, you were not alone.*

Standards. . .

. . . What students should know and be able to do.

—Academic content: sometimes called curriculum standards.

—Student performance: acceptable level of competence demonstrated.

As these new standards are implemented for all students, many parents of children with disabilities are concerned about their child's participation in the required tests, especially if their child has never participated in classroom or district-wide testing in the past. Some of the concerns expressed by parents are:

- ***The tests are too hard. I don't want her to take them.***
- ***I hope he doesn't have to take that test. He may feel he has failed.***
- ***My child is in a different program. She is not learning typical academic subjects. She needs a different test.***

These are valid concerns. However, consider this: If schools do not gather data on students with disabilities, they cannot be held accountable for students' outcomes. Additionally, students will not get the help they may need as a result of school reforms focusing only on children *without* special education needs. Six million students with disabilities nationwide will be left out! If students with disabilities are excluded from tests and overall assessments—**they won't count.**

In response to national data revealing that children with disabilities were typically excluded from testing, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA: P.L. 105-17) has mandated that:

- Students with disabilities must be included in all district-and state-wide assessments.
- Alternate assessments must be developed for students who cannot participate in the general assessment.
- Students with disabilities must have access to the regular education curriculum.

How did students with disabilities participate in the past?

What has been the history of testing students with disabilities in schools? National data has shown that children with disabilities were typically excluded. Most often, students with IEP's were not included in any kind of grade level testing in schools. Since the mid 70s, it was believed that the IEP could be used to measure the progress of individual students. But were educators gathering statistics from the district, state or national level that could analyze the progress being made by students with disabilities? The answer is *no*. Studies show that only five states collected data on the performance of students with disabilities.

Why were so many youth with disabilities excluded from state- and district-wide testing in school? There were many reasons, but the most frequently cited are:

- Regulations and policies to include all students did not exist.
- Schools wanted to have the highest test scores possible, therefore they excluded most students with special learning needs.
- Parents and educators thought they should "protect" students from stress and frustration.
- The dual system of regular and special education resulted in districts acknowledging responsibility for the progress of regular education students, and assuming that special education teachers would monitor the progress of students with disabilities.
- Schools had limited knowledge about testing accommodations for students with disabilities, therefore they were usually not available.

How will students with disabilities participate in assessments?

Youth with disabilities do not fit a common profile. Schools must focus on each student individually to determine the best way for the student to participate in assessments.

The following options exist for special education students:

- *Those who are able to participate just like their classmates without disabilities.* When a student participates in the regular curriculum (receives the same instruction) she/he can take the same test given to students in regular education. This would be true if the child's disability does *not* require accommodations.

Accommodations. . .

. . . Student is given the same task as other students but with a variation in: Time, Response Format, Setting and/or Presentation Format. Examples:

- **Time:** extended time, adjusted for time of day
- **Response Format:** Word processors, Braille writers, sign language, voice-activated computers, tape recorders, scribe
- **Setting:** Small group administration, taking test in quiet room alone, special lighting, desk adaptation
- **Presentation Format:** Large print, Braille versions, magnification aides, shortened testing segments, audio cassettes

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- *Those who are able to participate with accommodations (such as large print, quiet room, scribe, extended time).* When a student has disabilities that require accommodations, he/she can participate in the same assessment as students without disabilities, when provided with the needed accommodations. Whenever the student needs accommodations, the IEP should document that the student will receive these accommodations during classroom instruction and testing.
- *Those who are provided with an alternate assessment.* When the content of a student's curriculum differs from what is taught in the regular classroom, the overall assessment must differ. Assessments must reflect the content of a student's program and measure progress towards state or district standards. Even a student with the most severe or profound disabilities can be assessed to determine what they can do and if they are making progress. Often these assessments look at student behavior observed by teachers and parents in both structured and unstructured situations (student participation in planning a group report or cooperative behavior on the playground). Federal agencies estimate that no more than 1-2% of the total student population would receive alternate assessments. This amounts to approximately 10% of the students in special education. *Note: Federal regulations under IDEA state that alternate tests must be available for the 2000-2001 school year.*
- *Those who are provided with a combination of assessments.* Many special education students participate in the regular education curriculum and also receive some special education services. When a student participates in both regular and special education, each assessment must reflect the instruction that was provided.

Who makes the assessment decisions?

How students with disabilities will participate in classroom, district and state-wide assessments is determined by the IEP team. The decisions must be documented in the IEP. If the student will not participate in regular assessments, the IEP must explain why any specific assessment is not appropriate and indicate the alternate assessment that will be provided. Additionally, specific accommodations needed for classroom instruction and testing must be fully described.

As parents, we are members of the IEP team. If we want our sons and daughters to benefit from education reform, it is crucial that we be included in these discussions and decisions. The IEP we develop when our children are in the early elementary grades may determine their opportunities throughout high school and into adulthood.

How do assessments affect my child's education?

How students participate in assessments may affect the type of diploma they receive and thus may expand or limit their opportunities for the future. Assessment and graduation requirements differ from state to state. In some states, the Department of Education establishes regulations for assessments, but may allow the local education agencies (school districts) to determine policies regarding the type of documents available to students upon graduation (diplomas, certificates, etc).

Reform efforts in many states have caused changes in the criteria necessary to obtain a regular diploma. These changes could include the number of credits required to graduate, revised course content, and required assessments with passing scores. We know that many states have increased the type of documents available to students

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upon graduation. What we do *not* know is how these documents will be viewed by employers and post secondary institutions. The regulations and policies within your state may affect whether your son or daughter will receive a regular education diploma or another type of document upon graduation.

What can you do?

As a parent, you can lead the IEP team to maintain high expectations in order to prepare your child for adulthood. To make good decisions, there are important questions you must ask, since many states tie assessment results to graduation requirements or to the type of graduation document provided. These are questions you need answered to help plan your child's educational program and to participate as an IEP team member. They include the following:

Questions to ask about assessments:

- When are the assessments given (e.g., 4th, 8th, 12th grades)?
- What is the subject or content the assessment covers (e.g., reading, writing, mathematics, etc.)?
- What kinds of assessments are given (e.g., the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, the Stanford Achievement Test, a student assessment developed by your own state)?
- How long do the assessments take (e.g., duration of session, number of days)?
- How must students respond (e.g., short answer, multiple choice, writing samples, performance based)?
- What kind of accommodations are allowed (e.g., is there a listing of state approved test accommodations)?
- What alternate assessments will be used (e.g., if you child is not able to take the general assessment)?
- Who determines if an alternate assessment matches the content of a student's program and can measure achievement?
- How do the schools use the scores (e.g., for grade promotion, in order to graduate, identification of students who need help, curriculum planning, school performance reporting)?

Questions to ask about graduation:

- What graduation options exist in your state (e.g., standard diploma, honors diploma, IEP diploma, certificate of attendance, certificate of achievement, high school certificate, etc.)?
- What requirements are attached to each graduation document (e.g., specific courses, number of credits, Carnegie units, final examination)?
- Are graduation requirements tied to the assessments taken throughout the school years?
- What exit document will be given to a student who takes alternate assessments?
- What effect will the document they receive upon graduation have on future adult goals (e.g., career, technical school, college)?
- How long can special education students continue their schooling (e.g., what are the policies and services for students age 18-21)? *Note: Federal regulations under IDEA state that once students have graduated with a regular high school diploma they are no longer eligible for a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). But service can continue for students receiving graduation certificates or other kinds of exit documents.*

Many states are now in the process of piloting assessments, developing alternate assessments and defining graduation criteria. This is an important time to ask questions about state assessments and graduation policies. If you need information on any of these issues, the Parent Training and Information Center in your state can assist you (see sidebar). The answers you receive will help you and your student make meaningful education decisions.

Resources

- Thurlow, Elliott, & Ysseldyke (1998). *Testing Students With Disabilities.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.
- IDEA Law (1999). *IDEA '97 final regulations major issues.* **http://www.ideapractices.org/regs/majorissues.html**
- PACER Center of Minneapolis, MN web site: **http://www.pacer.org/index.html**

Parent Training and Information Centers

Parent centers in each state provide training and information to parents of infants, toddlers, school-aged children, and young adults with disabilities and the professionals who work with their families. This assistance helps parents participate more effectively with professionals in meeting the educational needs of children and youth with disabilities. The Technical Assistance Alliance for Parent Centers (the Alliance), coordinates Parent Training and Information Centers throughout the Nation.

Information on the Parent Training and Information center in your state can be received by contacting the Alliance Coordinating Office:

Alliance Coordinating Office:
PACER Center
4826 Chicago Avenue South
Minneapolis, MN 55417-1098
1-888-248-248-0822 (National Toll Free Number)
(612) 827-2966 voice
(612) 827-7770 TTY
(612) 827-3065 fax
E-mail: alliance@taalliance.org
Web site: www.taalliance.org
PACER web site: http://www.pacer.org/index.html

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Federal Laws Containing Language Addressing Education Reform and Assessments

- **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Public Law 105-117).** Passed in 1975. Assures a free appropriate public education for all students with disabilities in need of special education services. It was reauthorized in 1997 with expanded language regarding IEP's and state, district assessments. It mandates that: 1) students with disabilities be included in all assessments, 2) the IEP must document accommodations needed for a student to participate, 3) students not able to participate in the general assessment must be given an alternate assessment—the IEP must document *why* the student can not participate in the standard test and specify *what* will be used instead, 4) reports be made to the public regularly. New language in IDEA also emphasizes the involvement and progress of each child with a disability in the general education curriculum.

- **Goals 2000: Educate America Act (Public Law 103-227).** In March of 1994 Goals 2000 was signed into law. The purpose was to initiate school reform and provide funds for schools to meet that challenge. It emphasizes high standards for students and improved assessments to monitor progress. Goals 2000 clearly states *all* students will be included and requires students with disabilities be considered in all aspects of school reform.

- **School-to-Work Opportunities Act (Public law 103-239).** This law, passed by Congress in May of 1994, is to assist schools in combining classroom instruction and workplace training. It clearly states that students with disabilities are to be included. The opportunities provided through this law can help students during the transition years from school to work.

- **Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) (Public Law 103-382).** This law authorizes funding for Title I programs that provide students with extra help in math and reading. IASA states that the funding support is for *all* students, including those with disabilities. States that have set standards in math and reading to receive *Goals 2000* dollars can use these same standards to receive additional Title I money.

This Parent Brief was prepared for the National Transition Network by **Marge Goldberg,** Consultant, MN.;
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The National Transition Network (NTN) is funded by Cooperative Agreement H158M50001 from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, U.S. Department of Education. The views expressed in this Parent Brief are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Transition Network, the Institute on Community Integration or their funding sources.

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